

# Lessons From the Practice

## The Craft

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He had been a large, imposing man. The cancer had consumed the sturdy, muscular substance of his bulk. Left behind was sallow, unnaturally aged flesh drooping over the rafters and beams of his face and skeleton. His hands were large, with thick tapered fingers that retained, ironically it seemed, their appearance of strength. But they looked unnatural, hinged to spindly forearms that were at one time powerful and brawny.

He was admitted with metastatic lung cancer and a new pneumonia. Since his diagnosis six months before, he had been in and out of the hospital for x-ray therapy, pleural effusions, and finally, a superimposed pneumonia. The weary house staff, having briefly presented the patient's case to me, were occupied elsewhere with the work of discharging patients and writing orders for the day.

He stared keenly out the window. Despite his wasted condition, I had a sense, based on nothing but my experience with people and the suffering of patients, that Mr Casey wanted not so much to be "cured," but to be productive once again and to leave the idleness of the hospital routine.

I was discouraged by the fact that we could treat the pneumonia but in no way alter the work of his cancer. How gratifying it must be to repair arteries, pin bones, replace heart valves. The act of using your hands to restore health, to physically rearrange disordered body parts, seemed comforting and simple. Not so with internal medicine. His cancer had overwhelmed Mr Casey, and, medically, I had little to offer. How could I help him?

"Mr Casey, what kind of work do you do?" I asked, trying to draw him out.

Immediately he brightened and turned his attention away from the busy streets outside. "I'm a carpenter, Doc. I can build anything with wood. I started with my dad's rule and saw, and now I make cabinets to order. You should see my work."

Impressed by this burst of enthusiasm, I was anxious to hear more. "Tell me what it's like," I said, leaning forward earnestly.

For the next 30 minutes, I entered my patient's world of

craftsmanship. He described the years of journeyman carpentry, the thrill of putting up a house, and his pride in creating cabinets of his own design. He took a picture album from his bedside stand and showed me photos of his work, some completed, other pieces half finished. There was pride and dignity in his face despite the shrunken, distorted features.

I was deeply moved by this candid, totally honest display of himself and what he believed in. The real tragedy was the loss of this skill, of his craft, to cancer. He didn't fear death but was tortured by his forced inactivity; he had been robbed of purpose.

"What do you want to do when you get out of the hospital?" I wondered aloud. Could I somehow focus him on something?

He made an attempt to smile. "Well, I think I'll finish that dining room hutch I showed you. Then I'll take a picture of it and let you see it."

"I'll look forward to it," I answered. "We can't cure your cancer, but we will help you get home and back to your shop." I stood up to leave.

"Thanks a lot, Doc."

We shook hands. His substantial, calloused grip enclosed my soft, fleshy hand. For a moment I envied him his talents and his art. I glanced back at Mr Casey from the door and watched him study his photos. I realized I had been practicing my craft and didn't even know it.

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*"Lessons From the Practice" presents a personal experience of practicing physicians, residents, and medical students that made a lasting impression on the author. These pieces will speak to the art of medicine and to the primary goals of medical practice—to heal and to care for others. Physicians interested in contributing to the series are encouraged to submit their "lessons" to the series' editors.*

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